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**DANTE:**  
**A Guide to Further Study**

COMPLIMENTARY  
ITALY AMERICA SOCIETY



# DANTE:

## A Guide to Further Study

EDITED BY  
THE NATIONAL DANTE COMMITTEE

//  
INTRODUCTION BY  
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COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

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## INTRODUCTION

A WORLD celebration will commemorate the six hundredth anniversary of the death of Dante, who is best known as the "divine poet," and whose immortal poem is called the "Divine Comedy." In America (a land which was not evoked from the unknown, until nearly two centuries after Dante was "midway upon the journey of (his) life"), where few of us know the language spoken by him, and where many hold other faith than his, we join in the homage of the author of the unmatched drama of the soul. Because it is such a drama, because it is the story of a struggle which every man must make to possess his own spirit against the forces that would enslave it, this man, in whose epic "ten silent centuries found a voice," is remembered six centuries after his death. That those who have never heard this voice or who have not found it articulate, may have a share both in the homage and in the spiritual enjoyment of this Dante solemnity, this little primer, prepared by one of his own people (Contessa Irene di Robilant), who has learned our tongue, is put forth by the National Dante Committee.

JOHN H. FINLEY.



## CHAPTER I

### BIRTH AND EARLY LIFE OF DANTE—HIS LOVE STORY

THE origin of the Alighieri family can be traced to a knight named Cacciaguida, who took part in the second Crusade in the year 1147. Dante meets his ancestor in the *Paradiso*, and in his conversation with him, the scanty information which we possess about Dante's family is to be found.

Cacciaguida's son married a girl from northern Italy who bore the family name of Alighieri or Aldighieri. This she transmitted to her son Alighiero, from whom it passed on, first to his son, then to his grandson Durante or Dante.

Dante's father is said to have been a notary. His mother was called Bella, and was the daughter of Messer Durante degli Abati, whence the name of the poet, her first-born.

Dante Alighieri was born in Florence in the year 1265—the exact day we do not know. He tells us that he was born in the spring, and Boccaccio, a Florentine writer of the time and his first biographer, speaks of May 21 as his birthday. All children born in Florence were chris-

tened in the Church of St. John the Baptist. "Il mio bel San Giovanni" is recalled with tenderness by the poet, who was christened there, perhaps on March 25, 1266. In the course of the *Paradiso*, Dante tells us that his birth coincided with the sun's crossing the star sign of Gemini, a presage of literary genius.

Little is known of Dante's childhood. His mother died when he was an infant; his father remarried and had three other children, one of whom, a girl, is mentioned in the *Vita Nuova*. His father died about 1283, so that at the age of eighteen or earlier, Dante was an orphan. His family was not rich but they had some possessions, and it is certain that they associated with the highest nobility of Florence.

The poet tells us that he learned by himself to say things in rhyme. At school he learned to read Virgil and some of the books of the Fathers of the Church. Subsequently, he made a deep study of them and became acquainted with many of the old Latin masters. He then acquired a fair knowledge of astronomy, a little geography and history and a few notions of natural history. Later he turned his mind to serious study and came into contact with the learned people of his day. His power of assimilating knowledge, his accuracy in observing nature and his love of learning are responsible, far more



than his school education, for the wonderful culture which was to be revealed to us in the *Divine Comedy*.

In Dante's day, Latin was still the language of learning in Italy but the people there, as well as in France, had begun to express themselves in a vernacular, a sort of dialect which varied from one province to another. This language was gradually enriching itself, owing to the necessity of finding new words and expressions to describe new ways of thinking and acting. While Dante was growing up, a group of young Florentines were writing verses in the Tuscan vernacular; the names of some, like Guido Cavalcanti and Lapo Gianni, have survived, and their songs show a growing taste and elegance of form. In choosing this vernacular in which to write his masterpiece and in enriching it thereby, Dante may be said to have created the Italian language as it is spoken today. The idiom which he used gradually replaced thereafter the Latin tongue all through the peninsula of Italy.

Love was the principal subject of the vernacular songs and, according to the new spirit of the age, the poets had a tendency to idealize this sentiment and make of it an abstract form of devotion. The "Fair Lady" appealed to, was often the symbol of an ideal or a reality turned into a symbol. Provençal and French lit-



erature had come over the Alps with the minstrels; and certainly the "*Gestes*" of Charlemagne, the stories of Lancelot and Tristan, were familiar to the students of that age, and must have impressed greatly the youthful Dante.

One of his greatest friends, Guido Cavalcanti, emerged from this group as a real innovator, not only in expression, but in tendencies. At once philosophically and worldly-minded, he breathed fresh life into old forms. Love itself becomes a real figure, a person; sentiments take the form of a host of sprites who permeate the poet and either delight or torment him. This innovation was called the "*stil nuovo*" (new style); and of this, Dante was to be the crowning glory.

The revival which follows the Middle Ages, the glorious Italian "*Rinascimento*", really began in a measure with Dante's contemporaries. Besides the "new style" in poetry, with its idealizing of love, the fine arts were flourishing and Florence was being adorned with those jewels of architecture and painting which are still admired today. Cimabue, who made the world marvel with his painting of the Madonna, was closely followed by Giotto, whose fame spread far and wide; he too was a friend of Dante and left us a portrait of him from memory. The poet cared for art of every kind, and liked to

speaking of it; he even tells us that he once drew an angel on a tablet.

*The Love Story*

In Dante's youthful book, the "Vita Nuova," we find nearly all we know about his Beatrice, whom he idealized in the *Divine Comedy* to such a degree that she seems unreal. He does not call her by any family name, but the facts of her life and death which he mentions, coinciding with the testimony of Boccaccio, are authority for the statement that she was the daughter of Folco Portinari, a man of importance in thirteenth century Florence. Her name was Bice, the familiar form of Beatrice; she was married to a prominent citizen, Simone dei Bardi, and died in 1290.

Dante tells us that when he was in his ninth year he met a child of nearly his age, named Beatrice. He made no further advance in acquaintance for nine years, but she had already made a great impression upon him and when, grown into a modest and lovely woman, she first greeted him, he felt so deep an emotion that he knew that love had touched him. Without naming her, he wrote his first love sonnet, which he sent to Guido Cavalcanti and other poets. In the two years that followed, he wrote verses for Beatrice, and for two other women as well. He excuses him-

self by saying that he did not really love these two, but used them successively to screen his real love from the eyes of the people. What is certain is that Beatrice first smiled upon him and then resented his courting another woman, but never said that she cared for him. Once, to his lasting distress, she laughed at him. She married another man and Dante probably attended her wedding; but, apart from mentioning the emotion which suddenly overcame him at an unidentified bridal festival, he does not speak of her marriage. He mentions her father's death and the consequent grief of his beloved, and tells us that he had a presentiment of her death. In fact, she died not very long after, in the year 1290, and the poet mourned her deeply. In a vision he sees her transported to Heaven by angels; and he ends the "Vita Nuova" thus:

"A wondrous vision appeared to me, in which I saw things which made me promise to speak no more of this blessed one until, if it pleases God, I shall yet write concerning her what hath not before been written of any woman." (D. G. Rossetti.)

In this statement we have the promise of which the *Divine Comedy* was to be the fulfillment.



## CHAPTER II

### MANHOOD—POLITICAL LIFE—EXILE AND DEATH —A PORTRAIT OF DANTE

**I**N his book called the "Banquet," Dante tells us that some time after the death of Beatrice, he began to read the book of the Roman philosopher Boethius and Cicero's treatise on Friendship, and to frequent the schools of the friars and listen to the disputations of learned men. Famous at that time was the school of the followers of St. Dominic, in the Church of Santa Maria Novella, and after some thirty months of intense study, philosophy became Dante's besetting interest. His declaration in the "Banquet," that philosophy was symbolized in a fair lady to whom he had often alluded after the death of his beloved, has been brought forward as an analogy by those who maintain the unreality of Beatrice.

He made a deep study of astronomy, probably using the text of the Arabic scholar Alfraganus, who in the Ninth Century, wrote the "Elementa Astronomica." He read and loved and committed to memory Virgil, whose Aeneid was the principal text-book in mediaeval schools, and he became acquainted with all the other Roman

Classics then accessible. He perfected also his study of the Sacred Texts and of the books of the Fathers of the Church, St. Augustine, St. Bernard, St. Peter Lombard, St. Peter Damian, and above all St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure, in whose books he found the Christian philosophical basis on which he was to build his masterpiece.

Dante's life was, however, far from being completely absorbed by study. His mind was intensely occupied with politics; at this period, too, he seems to have led a life which he afterwards condemned as wordly.

In order to comprehend his political interests, his exile and the part played, both in his life and in his work, by popes, emperors and factions, one must pause a moment to glance at the map of Italy as it was in his time and get a comprehensive idea of what papal power and empire meant to the people of his day.

Italy was far from being united. The Pope, besides being the head of the Catholic Church, had territorial possessions extending from Rome and its surroundings to the mouth of the river Po. Sicily, as well as the southern part of Italy, had passed from the Norman rulers to a king of the house of Swabia, or Hohenstaufen. The dukes of Savoy (ancestors of the present kings of Italy), the Visconti, the Scaligeri, the Malas-

pina's, the Saluzzo's and other important feudal families, had possessions in northern Italy. Venice, Genoa and Pisa were small but powerful maritime republics whose commerce extended to the eastern and Dalmatian ports, and to the coasts of Africa. Dante's own Florence was a republic. Italy had seen foreign invasions ever since the downfall of the Roman Empire. The Huns, the Goths, the Germans had come and gone, taking rich bounty with them and leaving the country impoverished and dissatisfied.

At the time of Dante, two contending powers coveted the dominion of Italy, the Pope on one side, the German emperor on the other. The parties and individuals favoring the interests of the former, called themselves Guelfs, a name originating from the house of Welf, rulers of Bavaria opposed to the emperor. Those who stood for the emperor, that is to say for the house of Swabia, called themselves Ghibellines. This was the origin of the names of the two powerful factions which came to represent personal and local interests far more than those for which they had originally stood, and which sought aid on the side with which their aspirations coincided.

When Dante was born, the Ghibellines had been defeated. Their leader, Manfred, of the imperial house of Hohenstaufen, had been killed at the battle of Benevento, and the Guelfs, to



whom the Alighieri family belonged, had the dominion of Florence. But they were not long united for soon there were White and Black Guelfs. The former party, to which Dante inclined, would today be called the democratic one. The Whites wanted the people to be independent of outside authority and free from any kind of feudal tyranny, while the Blacks intended Florence to become an aristocratic papal province.

In Dante's mind both institutions, Church and Empire, were equally sacred and destined by God to rule side by side. His family did not favor the interests of the Hohenstaufen, and therefore stood on the Guelf side; but in the emperor, Dante saw the natural successor of Augustus, the rightful head of the Roman Empire who was to unite the whole of Italy as formerly, under the far-reaching scepter of a Caesar. To deny the right of the empire was a crime in his eyes just as much as to interfere with the spiritual dominion of the Pope, the rightful successor of the Apostle Peter.

To define Dante as Guelf or Ghibelline is equally difficult; it appears clearly that he did not favor the temporal power of the Church, neither did he recognize the spiritual leadership of the empire. He wanted to see each occupy its rightful place, and (what lay above all in his

thoughts), to see Italy united by a stronger bond than that which the common tongue supplied. The unity dreamt of by Dante was only obtained by Italy six centuries after his death; but not less than the tongue he gave them, his book, symbol of national aspiration, kept the people of the peninsula together through centuries of obscurity, and was to be the corner stone of Italian independence.

Going back to the life of Dante—from his thirtieth year he took an active part in the political life of his city. Earlier, as a young man, he had fought bravely in the battles of Campaldino and of Caprona; in 1300 he became a member of the council of citizens which governed Florence. The democratic laws of his party having decided that only those enrolled in a guild of some kind, an "art" as it was then called, could enter public life, we find Dante regularly enrolled in the "art" of physicians and chemists (*Speziali*), probably because the latter traded in books as well as in spices. The writers and painters, among whom Dante had many friends, were not yet counted as members of a particular art.

In the records and in the chronicles of his contemporaries we find some news of Dante's political career; we know that he made several speeches, that his advice was wise, and that he was entrusted with the rebuilding of a street. He



visited the ancient University of Bologna, and in 1300 he went as ambassador to the town of San Gemignano to invite that community in Florence's name to take part in the congress of the Guelph league. An inscription on a marble slab has been placed in the central room of the town hall of San Gemignano to commemorate Dante's embassy.

In that same year the poet went to Rome, to take part in the pilgrimage which, during the papal jubilee of 1300, visited the shrines of the Apostles. The great Christian certainly knelt with fervent devotion before the tombs of Peter and Paul. From Monte Mario he must have looked down on the Eternal City and seen the pilgrims crowd along the banks of the golden river Tiber. The greatness of the Catholic Church, the one Christian church of his age, impressed him deeply, and he was so loyal to that Church that the corruption and worldly ambition which had infected many of the clergy, and even the Pope, filled him with indignation, as it had filled Sts. Peter Damian and Hildebrand. In the *Divine Comedy* he blamed Constantine for having given earthly dominion, "cause of so much harm," to the successor of St. Peter.

Before this, probably in the year 1296, Dante had married Gemma Donati, a Florentine noblewoman of whom little is known. Boccaccio asserts that the poet's family life was not happy.

The idea of his having celebrated Beatrice and married Gemma Donati did not appeal to many of his biographers, and the fact that Gemma did not follow him in his exile, and that probably he never saw her again, give a certain color of plausibility to the tradition that she was not worthy of her great companion. Unprejudiced examination of the facts, however, discloses nothing against her good name. To remain a bachelor was an unusual thing in those days, and Dante married a woman of his station in life, to whom he had early been affianced, who had some possessions, and who probably made him a very good wife. It may be supposed that he was more absorbed in politics and studies than in his family; but although his youth may have been gay, he may be assumed to have been a dutiful husband and good citizen when he reached the age and undertook the responsibilities of manhood. Gemma's not having followed him into exile can also be explained by the fact of her having young children for whom she could provide in Florence, while they would probably have perished on the way-side if they had followed their father.

Dante had several children; the existence of four, two boys and two girls, can be asserted historically. The boys, Piero and Jacopo, annotated and made known their father's work; a daughter, *Antonia*, was still alive in 1332; and the young-

est, Beatrice, ended her days in a convent in Ravenna. She probably closed the eyes of Dante and her youth and name may have comforted the last days of the tired poet, reminding him of another Beatrice and of better days.

### *Exile and Death*

To recall the political events and all the strife of the Black and White parties which led to Dante's exile, would fill a book; and many books have been written to illustrate this period of the history of Florence. Here we cannot go into details and must only outline the facts which forced one of the greatest men the world has ever known, to wander from place to place and finally to die far from the city he loved.

As said before, Dante leaned to the White party and was against Florence's becoming a papal province. In one of the councils in which he sat, he firmly opposed Florence's sending help to the papal troops in Romagna. But in the meantime, the Pope, Boniface VIII, had held intercourse with the Blacks, who, headed by Corso Donati, were in the hope of ousting the Whites and getting dominion over Florence.

The contending adversaries sought opportunities for provocation and grew every day more desperate; frequent riots were the issue; and finally the Pope, aided by the grandees of the Black



party, called for the aid of the French prince, Charles of Valois.

The Whites, then in control of the city of Florence, sent a mission to Boniface to plead their cause; although the matter is not perfectly certain, it is probable that Dante, whose name was famous and who could speak as well as write, was among the ambassadors. Boniface promised to send Charles of Valois as a peacemaker, saying that his troops would enter Florence unarmed, to discuss and settle the aspirations of both parties. The French prince entered Florence, on All Saints' Day in 1301. Dante must have foreseen that it would fare badly with him and the city he loved and luckily for posterity, he was absent from Florence, or probably he would not have escaped with his life. For with Charles of Valois, the Black Party entered, armed, and took possession of the town. The houses and possessions of the Whites were sacked on false evidence of barratry and treason; the leading men of the party were condemned to a heavy fine and to exile. Dante's sentence was read on January 27, 1301, and on March 10, with fourteen other citizens, he was further condemned to be burnt alive if caught within the boundaries of Florence.

In the first three years, the exiles gathered together in the towns of Arezzo and Forlì, and in a

part of Tuscany named Mugello. Several attempts were made by them to fight the Blacks and re-enter Florence. Perhaps Dante took an active part in some of these efforts, which all failed, and the exiles did not agree. Especially, it would seem, they did not share the views of Dante Alighieri and he, giving up hope of returning to Florence with them, started out desolate and poor, "a pilgrim in nearly every place to which this tongue extends, against his will showing the wound of fortune." He never ceased longing for Florence and hoped to the last that his beloved city would call him back, there to end his life. His property had been confiscated, and only a small sum, corresponding to a part of her dowry, was given to his wife and young children in Florence. So he was utterly destitute and had to accept hospitality and pity, which must have been like burning fire to a nature so stern and proud.

He tells us how the bread of others tastes of salt, and how hard it is to go up and down other men's stairs. The house of the Scaligeri in Verona was the first to give him shelter, and he lived a while at the court of Bartolomeo or Alboino della Scala. He was to return to Verona for a longer stay some time after, as the guest of Can-Grande, Alboino's younger brother, who assured immortality to his name by becoming a host and protector of Dante.

In the following years he went from one place to another, received well by some, like the Malaspina's in Lunigiana, not so well by others. It has been said that he also visited Paris, but although the statement is made by two early authorities, it is not probable that Dante in his poverty could have taken so long a journey.

The coming of Emperor Henry VII to Italy, for a time revived Dante's hopes in the resurrection of the Roman Empire. He saw and spoke to the Emperor in Milan, and had a part in persuading him to bring his campaign into central Italy. Henry did not succeed and, with him, Dante's hopes died in the year 1313.

Not long after, opportunity was offered to him to return to Florence, but with such humiliating conditions that he proudly refused.

The last years of his life find him in Ravenna, a guest of Guido da Polenta; there he at last found the quiet and peace in which to end his masterpiece. His children must have visited him there; the friars of St. Francis offered him the quiet of their convent and the comfort of the spiritual life he loved. The great wood of pines extending from Ravenna to the Adriatic Sea saw the bent figure of the great Florentine coming to write and dream under their friendly shade. Until the last, everything interested him; nature in all its phenomena, science, art and knowledge.



Towards the beginning of the year 1321 he went to Venice on an embassy for his host; he did not succeed, and the fatigue of the journey hastened his end. He died in the autumn, probably on September 14, 1321, which is recognized as his memorial day. Guido da Polenta had him laid to rest in the church of the Franciscan friars with all the honors due to his great reputation. "Here he lies, and his fame moves the world," were the words of an epitaph recalled by Boccaccio as intended for his tomb.

His tomb was restored and adorned in 1500 and, notwithstanding the grief of the friars who had so long reverently watched over it, in 1765 the remains were moved and the memorial temple as it now stands was built and completed in the year 1780.

Florence, his native town, attempted several times to obtain the remains of Dante, to atone for her ingratitude towards the great citizen by building a grand resting place for him. Humbly she acknowledged her wrong and pleaded that it had been Dante's desire to rest near his "bel San Giovanni"; but the town of Ravenna would not give up the honor of keeping Dante's grave. So, before the image of the poet intent in reading his book, a silver lamp hangs, a gift of Florence, no longer ungrateful; and every year the olives that grow on the fertile Florentine hillsides pro-

vide the oil which gives permanent life to the flame, symbol of the soul and of love immortal.

### *A Portrait of Dante*

The familiar bronze bust in the Museum of Naples and the portrait in Florence have transmitted to us the features of Dante as he probably appeared to his contemporaries. Recently a fresco has been discovered in the church of San Francesco in Ravenna, which is supposed to be a portrait; possibly from memory, as the Giotto painting in the Bargello of Florence certainly is. This painting shows us a very young Dante, but it corresponds to Boccaccio's description:

"Our poet was of middle height, and after reaching mature years he went somewhat stooping; his gait was grave and sedate. He was always clothed in most becoming garments, his dress was suited to the ripeness of his years; his face was long, his nose aquiline, his eyes rather large than small, his jaw heavy, and his under lip prominent; his complexion was dark, and his hair and beard thick, black and crisp, and his countenance was always sad and thoughtful . . ." (Charles E. Norton).

The mention of a beard does not tally with the traditional Dante face, but it is highly probable that he had grown one in his old age, at the time when Boccaccio's informants saw him.



In any case, this description is undoubtedly an accurate one. Referring to the darkness of his complexion, an anecdote tells how the women of the people in Verona, regarding him with awe, attributed his tanned skin and crisp beard to the fires of hell, which he could visit at will.

"His manners, whether in public or at home, were wonderfully composed and restrained, and in all his ways he was more courteous and civil than any one else." Boccaccio (Dr. Norton). The passionate side of his nature was apparent only when people expressed political views different from his. "In this case he would even throw stones," Boccaccio naïvely declares. His violence is also recalled in one or two circumstances in which he heard labourers sing and distort his verses.

He perfectly realized his superiority to others; he was by nature proud, but too great a man and too thirsty for knowledge to be vain. As we have said, he had friends among artists. Besides knowing something about drawing, he loved music and doubtless took part in choral singing. Strains of music, song and dance, have in fact a most important place in the *Divine Comedy*.

Although his exile, his poverty, his dependent position must have made him suffer greatly, he always showed fortitude, and, except in a few words of longing for his native Florence, he

never openly complained of his misfortune, but sought appreciation, not pity, from his hosts. To these he endeavored to make returns for the hospitality offered, by some kind of help, such as conducting legal or political transactions, writing letters, or doing any other service which he could offer, and especially by introducing gracious compliments into his great poem.

## CHAPTER III

### THE MINOR WORKS—PRECURSORS OF DANTE— THE DIVINE COMEDY

**M**ANY contemporaries and immediate followers of Dante marvelled at and somewhat regretted his having written his principal work in the popular vernacular instead of in Latin, the official language of ancient and modern Rome. Besides the *Commedia*, he left the following works in Italian:

1. *The Vita Nuova*, a book belonging to the early period of the poet's life, containing 25 sonnets, 4 canzoni, 1 ballad and 1 stanza. The poems are accompanied by commentaries in prose, setting forth their meaning and the circumstances under which they were written. This makes the book an early type of what long afterward was to be called an autobiography. It can be divided into five parts:

I—Youthful love and rhymes about the physical beauty of Beatrice.

II—In praise of the spiritual beauty of Beatrice.

III—Death of Beatrice and sad rhymes.

IV—Love and rhymes for a gracious lady.

V—Return to the love and devotion for the deceased Beatrice.

The sonnets were written at various periods; Dante collected them and wrote the commentaries after Beatrice's death (1290).

2. The *Convivio* (Banquet) was to have been composed of 14 treatises as commentary to 14 songs and accompanied by an introductory chapter. Only the introduction and three songs with commentaries are known. It is probable that Dante did not find the time to complete the work according to his plan. While explaining the allegorical and real meaning of the songs, the poet discusses philosophical, moral and astro-nomic questions. It is interesting to note that in explaining why he did not write these commentaries in Latin, he speaks of the popular dialect as the "new light, the new sun which shall rise where the old one sets and will give light and color to those who are in the darkness because the former sun (the Latin tongue) does not shine upon them"—foreseeing that this vernacular was to become the language of a nation.

3. Many other *poems* in Italian belong to him, some connected with the themes of the "Vita Nuova," others disconnected. Moreover, there are some isolated poems of doubtful authenticity.



A series of lyrics of startling beauty deals with Dante's passion for a girl whom he calls Pietra.

4. Recently attributed to Dante by some critics, is a sequence of 232 sonnets, known as *Il Fiore*, an abridged paraphrase of the Old French "Roman de la Rose."

The Latin works are:

1. *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, which, as the name states, is an historical and critical work on composition in the popular vernacular. He examines speech from its origin and in the several groups of languages. He speaks of the dialects in France, comparing them with the Italian specimens which have the word "si" for the affirmative. The latter speech he examines in its fourteen dialectal variations, and states that in its fullness and richness of expression, it does not belong to any single province, but to Italy. He commends its use in poetry and speaks of the hendecasyllabic as the most appropriate for vernacular verse. Then he proceeds to a discussion of the principles of poetics and versification. The work is unfinished.

2. *De Monarchia* speaks of the rights of the empire, demonstrating the thesis that it is indispensable for the peace and happiness of the world, and developing the idea of a balance of temporal and spiritual authority.

3. *Quaestio de Acqua et Terra*, a geological discussion.

4. Two eclogues addressed to an admirer who had asked him to write Latin verse and to visit Bologna.

5. A dozen or more *Epistolae*; letters attributed to Dante and for the most part probably written by him. One of them, addressed to a friend, in which the poet refuses to return to Florence under the humiliating conditions suggested, is a very beautiful document. One addressed to CanGrande explaining the meaning of the *Divine Comedy* is interesting, but perhaps not authentic.

The early verses of Dante are in many ways charming, and his disquisitions are interesting and useful for an entire comprehension of his masterpiece; but it is in the *Divine Comedy* that the poet reveals his true greatness and attains immortality.

#### *The Precursors of Dante*

Before examining the contents and meaning of Dante's principal work, it is well to look into classical mythology, Arabic literature, the Latin writings of several early mystics, perhaps right into the books of Buddha, in search of the first journeys into the other world and the distant sources of the complex imaginative monument which was to receive life and color in the book of Dante.

in underworld  
unites

In Greek mythology and literature, we have the descent of Orpheus into the infernal regions in search of Eurydice; Theseus accompanying Pirithoos for the rescue of Proserpine; Hercules, who frees Theseus and returns with Cerberus in chains. In the *Odyssey*, the misty shadows of the deceased appear to Ulysses. Then the philosophers, treating of responsibility, conjecture the transmigration of the soul from one body to another; the conception of punishment and recompense in the other world, a very ancient idea in the far East, appears to some extent in Plato. In Latin literature, Cicero's "*De Republica*," a part of which was certainly read by Dante, describes Scipio beholding in a dream the good citizens placed after death among the stars, whither he is transported. The planets are seen in nine moving circles and our earth is immovable in the centre of the universe. In this we have the Ptolemaic system, the basis of Dante's conception of the *Paradiso*. Virgil's *Aeneid* was equally loved and attentively studied by Dante. Aeneas's visit to the infernal regions is recalled in the *Divine Comedy*; the names of the rivers, the boatman Charon and many episodes appear in Dante's *Inferno* almost exactly as they were in pagan literature. The Churchmen had turned the fallen angels into demons who guard and torment the sinners, and thus Dante portrays them.



Christian Literature:—Besides the Apocalypse of St. John (some of the images of which we encounter in Dante's earthly paradise) and the prophecy of St. Paul in his Epistle to the Corinthians, Christian literature has a crowd of religious visions in which the other world is described. The most important is the apocryphal "Vision of St. Paul." Important, too, are the "Well of St. Patrick" and the "Vision of Tundalus." Among the Italian visions we find that of Frate Alberico of Monte Cassino, who places murderers in a lake of blood, as a likeness to their sin, and describes other punishments which have some similarity to Dante's. The vision of a German nun, Mechtildis or Matilda, suggests in some respects Dante's *Purgatorio*.

Arabic Literature:—Great interest has been awakened among Dante students by a study published in 1919 by the Spanish scholar, Miguel Asin Palacios. After many years of research and study he has formed an interesting parallel between Dante's journey and Mohammed's journey into the other world, as vaguely alluded to in the Koran and described in the Eleventh Century by the Arab poet Risala. In the structure of the work and in several incidents, there is an analogy with the *Divine Comedy*. According to Asin Palacios, the inspiration of the Middle Age visions has an Islamitic origin, and the conception



of Hell as a cone under Jerusalem, as well as the idea of Purgatory, can be found in the legends of Mohammed, which, on the other hand, have a Christian as well as a Far Eastern origin.

Dante did not know Arabic; but, as said before, he probably studied algebra and astronomy in the Latin text of the Arabian Alfraganus. By placing Saladin among the great men of old, and by recognizing Averroës in their company, we may say that he acknowledged what his master St. Thomas Aquinas, and the culture of his time owed to the Moslems of Spain.

The ancient system, explained by Ptolemy and set forth in a treatise by Aristotle, commented upon and extended by Averroës, gave both Aquinas and Dante their idea of the universe.

### *The Divine Comedy*

The *Comedy*, which after Dante's death came to be called *Divine*, is a religious poem, based on Catholic theology. The age of Dante has been justly termed the age of religion. The crusades, the great mystic Saints, like Francis of Assisi, belong to that time. Emperors were crowned in Rome by the Pope; heresy was often punished with death. Dante was a son of his times, and although his gigantic mind embraced the world and sought knowledge in every accessible culture, the dogmas of his faith were to him

is real and positive as the existence of the planets and the shape of our globe.

According to the scholastic doctrine, which was the leading philosophical school of the time, everything in nature, science and reason contributed to assert and explain as perfectly logical the dogmatic principles of the Catholic Church. For Dante to doubt them would have been just as impossible as for the scholar of today to doubt the existence of electricity, and, accordingly, to understand the *Comedy* one must read it from a Roman Catholic point of view.

The letter to CanGrande explains that the title "*Comedy*" was given because the poem is not written in the classical Latin but in the popular dialect, and principally because, although it opens with tragic and tremendous scenes, the close is happy and desirable, so that it is in no way a tragedy.

The subject is the human soul, personified by Dante and considered in the three spiritual conditions of future life; that is to say, in damnation, purification and beatitude; in the three realms of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise.

This is the literal sense of the poem. In its allegorical significance it represents three states of spiritual life: sin, repentance, grace. To make it perfectly clear, Dante himself passes through these three states. He opens the poem by tell-

literal

allegorical

ing us how he had gone astray in a <sup>hell on earth</sup> dark forest after having lost the right path, by which he means that he was in a state of sin. Three besetting vices which take the form of a lion, a panther and a wolf, oppose him on his search for the right path. He is very near to perishing when, by the intercession of the Virgin and of Beatrice, God allows Virgil, the old Roman poet, to emerge from the other world and save him. Virgil is the symbol of reason, which ought to be the natural guide through life. Dante, the human soul (for he is himself a symbol), is so deeply lost in sin that the only road to salvation for him is the journey through the after life;—that he may first contemplate sin in its real aspect, he must look upon Hell; then turn to penance (Purgatory); which eventually leads to a comprehension of God and to eternal bliss in His presence (Paradise).

Accordingly, this great conception is divided into three parts: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso*. Each part is composed of thirty-three chapters—"canti," as they are called. The first canto of the poem is an introductory one; when it is added to the total, we have a prelude and ninety-nine other cantos, one hundred in all.

The repartition is not without a special meaning. It was the habit of the Middle Ages to attach mystical significance to numbers. For



Dante, the number three expresses the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, the Persons of the Unity of God. Equally sacred is the number nine because it is the square of three. Beatrice is "a miracle of the Trinity," and Dante recalls how he met her in her ninth year, saw her again nine years afterwards; and several incidents of her life and death in which the number nine occurs, appears to him as a revelation of the miracle worked by the Trinity of God. One hundred, on the other hand, is the square of ten, the "perfect number." It is necessary to mention the importance and the meaning of numbers in the composition of the poem, to render its interpretation easier. Three are the lands of earth—Europe, Asia, Africa; nine the revolving skies; three the states of the soul—sin, repentance, grace; three the realms of after-life—Hell, Purgatory, Paradise. These allegoric numbers appear again and again under various forms.

In the *Divine Comedy* we have a description of the universe as it appeared to the eyes of the learned men of that time. It embraces nearly every branch of contemporary knowledge, and therefore has been termed an encyclopedic book.

Dante indicates that his journey took place in the year of the papal jubilee, 1300, during Easter week. The descent into Hell, beginning on the evening of Good Friday, lasts a night and a day;

Trinity  
+ 9  
of 10



the ascent to Purgatory occupies a like period. The climb up the mountain of Purgatory takes three whole days. How long the poet remains in Paradise, he does not reveal.

We must try to get a comprehensive idea of the poem in its single parts, in order to consider it as a whole. We must remember that, while it is by inspiration a Christian poem, it is a broadly human work, containing teachings for every one of every faith and nation.

Dante, after God, loved his country above everything. He despised ingratitude and treason more than any crime, he considered one small act of kindness, one late tear of repentance, sufficient to atone for many a sin. He had so vast a conception of justice that he could not but conceive mercy with the same vastness.

is  
poem  
not a  
German,  
however.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE INFERNO

**I**N the universe described by Dante, we learn that our earth is round but only one half has habitable land. The other half, that is to say the part where America lies, is covered by water and has been so ever since Lucifer, the bad angel, was thrown from Heaven and fell to earth. The earth had opened so that he went right down to the center, but out of shame this part of the globe had covered itself with water.

Lucifer stuck with his three faces downwards, so that his front was turned to the old and then known part of the world. Round and above the three monstrous heads, the earth had also retired, forming the Inferno, a cone-shaped hollow of which the narrow part ended with Lucifer.

The land which had withdrawn above Lucifer's head; had risen on the other side of the globe and emerged like an island from the waters, forming the mount of Purgatory. According to the idea of the Middle Ages (based on a Bible passage), Jerusalem lay in the exact centre of the inhabited part of the globe; and Purgatory was placed by Dante at the antipodes of Jerusa-

lem. Following, then, his mystic idea right through the poem, we may imagine Calvary, the mount of redemption, with Purgatory, the mount of expiation, and the Empyrean Celestial Jerusalem, the heaven of salvation, all in a direct line, one the consequence of the other.

Dante does not say from whence he entered the Inferno; we only know that he is lost in a forest and frightened by the symbolical animals, when Virgil appears to him, and tells him that he must follow a new track to attain redemption. The old track is symbolically worldly life, spiritual life is the new one. Dante salutes the poet of ancient Rome with reverence and love but hesitates to undertake the journey. When Virgil tells him that Mary (Divine Mercy), Lucia (Divine Enlightenment) and Beatrice (Revelation—his Beatrice of earthly love) have interceded for him, he takes courage and follows Virgil into the other world. The Infernal regions are dark, dirty and sad. No stars light the gloom; nothing but desolation, lamentation, rain and wind fills the darkness. The Inferno is divided into nine circles; those nearest the top are the largest; they get narrower as we reach the centre of the earth. They are divided one from another by steep, rugged cliffs. Like the symbolic faces Lucifer, the principle divisions of sin are three number: incontinence—violence—fraud. The



last is the worst of all, for according to Dante's plan, every sin is punished according to its effect.

Dante and Virgil advance: and before entering the first circle, they meet a great crowd of people running after a flag. The flag is the symbol of the ideals which they did not have in lifetime, and they are condemned to run for eternity, while insects prick them incessantly. We learn that they belong to the crowd of "those who have never been alive," that is to say, who have passed through life without doing either good or harm. They have been useless and are consequently lost.

The mythological boatsman, Charon, "who round about his eyes had wheels of flame," rows the two poets across the first infernal river, Acheron.

In the first circle there is darkness but no torment. Christ, before His resurrection, had descended into this region, called Limbo by the Catholics, and had taken away with Him the patriarchs of the Bible; but the good men of pagandom who through no fault of their own, had not known Christ by prophecy remained, and with them remain the innocent children who have died before being baptized. In the middle is a noble castle where the darkness is less intense; there in a garden, poets and philosophers of old live without suffering. They have no pain, but



live deprived of the vision of God. Virgil belongs to these, with Homer, Socrates, Plato and many others. They welcome Dante among them and he talks with the five great poets, Homer, Virgil, Horace, Ovid and Lucan. Dante rejoices to find himself sixth in degree among them.

He then descends into the second circle, where Minos stands and assigns the damned to their places according to their sins. A violent gale sweeps the darkness and Dante perceives numerous shades, blown and torn about like helpless leaves in a storm. It is the wind of passion that punishes those who knew not how to control their desires and gave way to lust. Paris, Tristan, Cleopatra are shown by Virgil as they are carried by. Dante asks to speak with two figures who float by in close embrace, and seem to be carried lightly by the wind. By a special concession of God, it would seem, they are allowed to pause. They are Francesca da Rimini and her lover, Paolo. At Dante's request Francesca tells her moving story:

"Love, that on gentle heart doth swiftly seize,  
Seized this man for the person beautiful  
That was ta'en from me, and still the mode  
    offends me.

Love, that exempts no one beloved from loving,  
Seized me with pleasure of this man so strongly

That, as thou seest, it doth not yet desert me;  
Love has conducted us unto one death;  
Caina waiteth him who quenched our life."  
Francesca's sad fate must have created a stir  
at that time, and Dante was personally acquainted  
with her brother. She tells him how she gave  
way to the desire of her heart. Overcome by  
the pitiful story the poet faints and falls to the  
ground.

Both poets pass from one circle to another,  
contemplating the various effects and punish-  
ments of sin. The greedy are immersed in stink-  
ing mire, the prodigals and the mean push enor-  
mous weights, as though they were bags of gold,  
one against the other. Those guilty of heresy  
lie in fiery graves. Murderers and tyrants are  
immersed in a river of boiling blood. Suicides  
are turned into trees.

Dante breaks a branch from which blood  
drops, and a voice calls out: "Why do you break  
me?" It is Pier delle Vigne, the loyal minister  
of Frederick II, Emperor of Germany and King  
of Sicily. He had committed suicide after having  
been undeservedly removed from his office and  
condemned to ignominious death. He and many  
others beg Dante to tell the true story of their  
lives and the reality of their punishment as a  
warning to sinners.

The damned have not lost their memory, they

can see into the past and the future, while the present escapes them. Some ask Dante about conditions and people living, some tell him what is in store. From the heretic Farinata he hears for the first time the prophecy of his own exile.

It has been said that Dante took revenge on his own enemies by placing them in Hell, but the accusation is unfounded, friend and foe he treats with impartial justice.

He damns Boniface because that Pope called a foreign prince to take possession of Florence. On the other hand, because they had sinned against God and man, he places in Hell persons for whom he had sympathy, like Francesca, or for whom he had affection, like Brunetto Latini, his master and friend.

As the poets descend, leaving behind the incontinent and the violent, they find the sins punished more harshly because they belong to the third group of sin, fraud, the most despicable of all.

The eighth circle is divided into ten ditches, where different kinds of fraud are punished. Thieves are continually turned into serpents and back again into men, hypocrites are weighted down under leaden cloaks gilded on the outside.

Down in the depth on the ninth circle the traitors are immersed in ice as cold as their hearts when they were alive. Traitors to kindness, to country, to guests, to benefactors are seen. The



heads of some emerge from the ice, others are seen in the depths through the frozen lake on which Dante and Virgil walk.

While, on entering Hell, Dante has been deeply moved by compassion on seeing the punishment of sins due to intemperance, in the last part he is hard, even brutal; he goes so far as to strike with his foot one of the ice-walled traitors. The reason for this is twofold. One is theological: Dante is nearing the comprehension of God, and is consequently inflamed with hatred for His foes. The second is a personal, human one: Dante is himself a passionate man, not without faults, but thoroughly righteous in mind and heart; while he has pity and comprehension for sins due to passion, he has none for treason, which seems to him as hateful as it is monstrous.

A famous episode of this part of the *Inferno* is that of Conte Ugolino della Gherardesca, who made himself feudal lord of Pisa. Betrayed by the Archbishop of Pisa, Ruggeri, an arrant politician, he was imprisoned with his children and nephews and locked in a tower to die of hunger. The key, it is said, was thrown into the river Arno. A popular tradition, which Dante neither denies nor affirms, asserts that, maddened by hunger and despair, Ugolino devoured his dead children. He is in the ice among the traitors, gnawing the skull of his enemy Ruggeri. In



a highly dramatic narrative, Ugolino tells Dante about his imprisonment and the death of his children. Dante makes no comment upon him, but curses Pisa for having imposed the terrible punishment on the children:

"innocent were they by their youthful age."

At a time when it was considered fair to visit an offender's whole family with punishment and exterminate them for their fathers' sins, Dante's harsh invective gives a new extension to the conception of penal law.

The visit to the overcrowded Inferno is nearly ended; Dante and his guide have reached Lucifer, who is chewing a traitor in each of his three horrible mouths. Judas is in the central mouth and only his legs are visible. As companions to the traitor of Christ, in the two other mouths, are Cassius and Brutus, because they had betrayed and slain Caesar, sacred in Dante's eyes as founder of the empire.

As, as we have said, Lucifer was lodged in the centre of the earth, Dante and Virgil descend through a crevice along his hairy sides; and then, following a rough dark path, they emerge on the other side of the globe, and find themselves on an island shore whence again they can see the stars.

## CHAPTER V

### THE PURGATORIO

ACCORDING to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, the souls of those who have fully repented, even if only at the moment of death, and of those penitents who have wiped out their sins by acts of charity, are saved by the mercy of God from eternal punishment and pass a period, varied in length according to their unexpiated sins, in a place called Purgatory, where they atone for their misdeeds and acquire the necessary purity for entering Paradise.

This place, with the sinners and their punishments, is described by Dante in the second part of his poem. Of all the *Commedia* it is the most human part, and of all the spirits evoked by Dante those in Purgatory are the nearest to us. They suffer in patience, almost in joy, because they know that they are sure of salvation; they are pathetic without being terrible. The scene has no longer the fantastic horror of the *Inferno*, no darkness, no demons, no lakes of blood; neither has it attained the mystic symbolism of the *Paradiso* where no human forms, no landscapes are described, nothing but light in the revolving skies.

Dante and Virgil have emerged from underground on the side of the globe opposite the Holy Land. The beach seems deserted, for no living man inhabits this side of the world. In the *Inferno* Ulysses had told Dante that he had sailed within sight of it, but from the sacred mountain a high wind had blown and a watery death had ended his audacity.

It is just before dawn, and Dante looks up at the stars to get an idea of his situation. He sees four bright stars, unfamiliar to him. "They have been seen only by the first created." This constellation is for him, the symbol of the four cardinal virtues which shine on Purgatory—prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude. When Dante reaches a higher part of the mountain and night returns, these four stars disappear, and in their place are three others symbolizing the Christian virtues necessary for nearing God—faith, hope and charity.

It does not seem out of place here to recall that more than two centuries after Dante's death, another Florentine, Amerigo Vespucci, on seeing for the first time the brilliant Southern Cross, greeted it with the words of Dante: "Four stars, seen only by the first created."

Reeds fragile and flexible like mankind grow on the beach. A venerable man appears to Dante and Virgil and questions them as to their inten-



tions. It is Cato, the philosopher of Utica, who has been taken from the Noble castle in Limbo and placed by Christ to guard the entrance of Purgatory, for no other so well as he, can personify justice and righteousness. Cato committed suicide, which was not a sin in his view, as he was not a Christian; he gave up life rather than submit to a violation of his principles of liberty and justice. Virgil tells how Dante is proceeding by the will of God and the intercession of Beatrice. Dante kneels reverently at the great philosopher's feet. Cato bids Virgil girdle the poet's waist with a reed (the symbol of humility) and leads them to the foot of the mountain.

They see a light boat arrive across the sea, gilded by the rising sun. It has no sails, but an angel with outspread wings stands at the helm and the light bark slides rapidly over the waves. It carries the souls destined to ascend the mountain, "the spirits sure of becoming beautiful." The angel collects them at the mouth of the river Tiber, and from the Mediterranean Sea bears them in a moment to the other side of the globe. Among them is a friend of the poet, the musician Casella.

As they go toward the mountain, Dante sees a crowd of people who have to wait at its foot for a long period of time; others wait on the lower slopes of the hill. This is a sort of "ante-



purgatory occupied by those who have died excommunicated or who have been late in repenting. Before beginning their ascension, they must pass a long period in idleness, a period which (as is the case for all the souls in Purgatory) can be shortened by the prayers of the living who remember them.

Among those on the shore Dante sees a youth, "Blond was he, beautiful, and of noble aspect—but one of his eyebrows had a blow divided." It is Manfred of Swabia, who had been killed at the battle of Benevento, as he recalls:

"Go to my daughter beautiful  
And the truth tell her if aught else be told.

After I had my body lacerated  
By these two mortal stabs, I gave myself  
Weeping to Him who willingly doth pardon.

Horrible my iniquities had been;  
But infinite Goodness hath such ample arms  
That it receives whatever turns to it."

The spirit of the troubadour Sordello, bears them company for some steps of their upward journey. On meeting them, he asks Virgil for his name. Virgil begins by saying that he comes from Mantua; at the mention of the town that was also his own, Sordello embraces Virgil in

joy, and Dante gives way to a passionate outburst on the conditions of his beloved but wretched Italy, where even citizens of the same town fight and kill one another, while these two men embrace like old friends at the mere mention of a common birthplace.

The ascent of the mountain of Purgatory proceeds slowly, and only by day, because not even one upward step can be taken when the light, symbol of the grace of God, does not shine.

Besides the "antepurgatory," the mountain is divided into seven different terraces separated by steep cliffs. The division corresponds to the seven deadly sins: pride—envy—anger—sloth—avarice—gluttony—lust. The sins punished in Purgatory are largely of a different kind from those in Hell. There is not a single traitor among the spirits here; there are in fact no sinners stained with the effects of habitual malice, because in Dante's mind such people were bad at heart and could not possibly turn to good.

The arrangement here is also different from that of Hell. Following the scheme of Plato, adopted by the Church, instead of that of Aristotle, sins are classed as "disorders of love;" that is to say, one sins through pride, envy and anger, if love is turned to a bad purpose; one sins from sloth for insufficient love; excess of worldly love is the cause of avarice, greed and lust. On each

terraces  
corresponds  
to 7  
deadly  
sins

terrace the sins are disciplined by a suffering opposite to the pleasure pursued and examples, not only of the sin but of the opposite virtue, are heard or seen in vision or in sculptured relief, by the penitents.

The mountain has the form of a cone, being made of the earth risen out of the abyss of Hell. The top is flat and wooded, and on it Dante places the Garden of Eden, the earthly paradise of Adam and Eve.

The door of Purgatory is guarded by an angel with a fiery sword. As it swings back on its hinges, Dante hears the sound of music. With the point of his sword, the angel marks seven P's (for the Latin *peccatum*) on the poet's forehead. The first circle in the one of pride, and the heads of the sinners are bowed down under heavy weights which they carry on their shoulders. Examples of humility are carved on the ground—Mary answering the announcing angel, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord," is the first sculptured scene. The Lord's Prayer and the anthem, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," are recited by the souls and sung by the Angel of Humility.

A stairway guarded by an angel is cut into every cliff between one terrace and another; and as Dante passes, with a touch of his wing, the angel removes one of the P's from his forehead, so that



he feels himself becoming lighter and lighter as he ascends.

In another circle the envious are punished by having their eyelids sewed together, because their eyes looked bitterly on the welfare of others. There are no sculptures here, because they could not be seen; but the words of Mary at the marriage at Cana, when she thought only of others in telling Christ "They have no wine," and "Blessed are the merciful" are sung by angels. ②  
envious

"Blessed are the peacemakers" is sung in the circle where anger is punished by smoke, smoke which blinds the penitents as passion did their actions in life. Ecstatic visions reveal memorable scenes of mercy. ③  
anger

In the *Inferno*, Dante and Virgil moved continually to the left; in the *Purgatorio*, instead, they walk to the right, being on the right track to salvation. In each circle Dante speaks to some of the penitents. Many are contemporaries of his, noted in their day, either historical characters or individuals of whom we have no other record than the words of Dante. Each has retained his personality and continues to be in after life what he was before. Most of them, speaking to Dante, ask him to remember them to those they left behind, by whose prayers they hope for a shortening of their trial. From Corrado Malaspina, whose descendants were to give him ref-



uge, for the second time Dante hears a prophecy relating to his exile.

In the nights passed in Purgatory (during which they can not ascend) Dante sleeps and dreams. Symbolic visions which presage the near future appear to him in slumber.

On the last terrace, lust is punished by the passing of the spirits through fire. "Blessed are the pure in heart" is sung and examples of chastity are described, beginning, as in every circle, with a scene from the life of the Virgin Mary who is for Catholics the image of absolute human perfection.

Dante himself has to pass through fire, which is a sort of confession of former sin. He hesitates; but Virgil encourages him by saying that Beatrice is waiting on the other side.

The part played by the poet of ancient Rome is growing gradually pale. On reaching the summit he says to Dante,

"Up to now my art could guide, beyond I do not reach; now use your own judgment, until you come to Her who shall lead you to God."

Virgil is the symbol of human reason, which has hitherto guided Dante; for the rest of his journey he will need another guide, namely Revelation, or Divine Grace, represented by Beatrice.

He enters the garden of Eden, which is full of flowers and shady trees, which surround the

famous apple tree of Adam and Eve. On a meadow covered with blossoms he sees a young woman walking lightly, gathering flowers. She is Matilda, symbol of the active life of original innocence.

Here Dante witnesses an allegorical pageant, the details of which are taken from the Apocalypse of St. John. A chariot symbolizing the Church approaches, drawn by a griffin, the dual nature of which stands for Christ (human and divine). Four animals accompany the chariot; these are symbols of the four gospels. All this typifies the Church in its glory, surrounded by white clad persons, the Books of the Bible. Three maidens stand at the right wheel. They are dressed in green, white and red, and are the Christian virtues, while the four cardinal virtues, dressed in purple, are on the left.

Dante sees symbolical attacks made on the chariot, by an eagle, a fox, a dragon, which represent imperial persecution, heresy and schism. All these attacks coming from the outside are lost sight of in a further vision, which is far from beautiful, and which indicates the depravity, in Dante's judgment, of those then ruling the Church.

All this symbolism culminates in the radiant appearance of Beatrice, the object of his youthful love. Although she is idealized through the

poem as the symbol of Revelation, in her first meeting with her old lover she appears very human and real. She reproaches Dante for having forgotten her so soon, and for having gone astray in the path of sin. He is stricken with bitter repentance and falls unconscious to the ground.

Matilda raises him and dips him in the waters of Lethe, one of the rivers of the earthly paradise, whereupon he is gifted with complete oblivion. Beatrice forgives him and makes him drink the water of the river Eunoë, to give him remembrance of good, instead of complete forgetfulness.

Ere this, Dante has looked around for Virgil. He has disappeared, but Beatrice comforts him in his dismay, and with her as his guide, he is pure and disposed to fly towards the stars.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE PARADISO

**D**ANTE'S *Paradiso* is not destined ever to become popular. Even in Italy, where the *Divine Comedy* is widely read, where some scenes of the *Purgatorio* and particularly those of the *Inferno* are generally known and quoted, the last canticum is comparatively neglected. It is known to be wonderful, but is considered beyond the comprehension of the average reader and therefore enjoyed only by Dante students and enthusiasts.

As said before, the *Comedy* in its allegorical sense represents the three states of the human soul—sin, repentance, pardon, and, further, three states of religious experience—cogitation, purification, exaltation. In the first two parts, the idea is clearly presented by human figures and sufferings, but the *Paradiso* is forcedly abstract. The spirits have no form and appear to Dante as lights. No topography, no night and day are evident, only different degrees of radiance throughout the celestial journey.

One must begin by having an idea of the construction of the heavens. Here Dante did not



build from his imagination as freely as he had in the other regions. The plan is from Ptolemy's conception of the universe, confirmed by St. Thomas Aquinas and by general scholarly opinion, of that day. Thus the order and position of the planets appear in Dante's sky as in his time, they were conceived to be.

"The whole physical universe is spherical like the earth; it is made up of a series of hollow, transparent spheres, one lying within another like the skins of an onion; and earth is its core. Each of these shell-like spheres or heavens, except the two outermost, contains one solid, visible, heavenly body. The very last one has none, and is therefore entirely transparent in every part. The next to last on the contrary, contains bodies almost too numerous to count, namely all the fixed stars, besides the mysterious 'Milky Way,' which keeps its secret even yet. Imagine nine soap bubbles one inside the other, all but the outside one flecked with bright points, and a dark speck in the middle of all . . . . All these spheres revolve together around the earth from east to west, once in 24 hours, carrying their stars with them." (Dante—Grandgent).

As in the other cantica, which possess an ante-hell for the unchristened, an ante-purgatory for those late in repenting, the last canticum has an ante-heaven formed by the three first skies; for

these are nearer to earth and do not revolve so rapidly as the others, and are somewhat less purely celestial because the cone-like shadow of our globe extends to them. In these Dante sees the spirits of those who have entered glory, but enjoy a minor degree of beatitude. However, they are all equally happy and do not wish for more.

The first seven heavens are named after the planets they contain, and according to the idea of the Middle Ages each planet influences a certain sphere of mental activity. Beyond the planets is the sky of the fixed stars: then the transparent starless crystalline or *primum mobile*, the origin of physical motion. Each sky is directed by one of the nine orders of angels.

Beyond these nine circles and encompassing the universe, is the Empyrean, seat of God. God first appears to Dante as a shining point encircled by nine fiery rings formed by the angelic orders. Presently is revealed the concourse of the elect gathered in a huge amphitheatre whose arena is a shining ocean of grace. "In more than a thousand circular tiers, around the vast gleaming pool, are seated the blessed in bodily form, as they will appear after the Resurrection. The Lord is shining on them from above; and between Him and them flits the swarm of angels." (Grandgent). This radiant assembly appears to

Dante as a white rose, in which each petal is a group of the blessed. Such is the goal of Dante's journey.

From the earthly paradise, on the summit of Purgatory he flies with Beatrice from one heaven to another.

I—The first is that of the moon, where he meets spirits who were compelled to break their vows. Piccarda Donati, a nun who was kidnapped from her convent, and the Empress Costanza appear to him in the pale light.

II—In Mercury, the heaven of active spirits, Justinian explains the destiny of the Roman Empire.

III—The heaven of Venus is for the amorous spirits. Among them is Charles Martel, not the French ruler, but the youthful heir and grandson of Charles of Anjou.

IV—In the heaven of the sun, source of light, Dante hears his master, St. Thomas Aquinas, tell the story of St. Francis. This is the planet of the great teachers; here St. Bonaventure also narrates the life of St. Dominic.

V—In the ruddy heaven of Mars the spirits of the defenders of the Faith appear in the sign of a radiant cross. Among them Dante sees his ancestor, the crusader Cacciaguida, who tells him the story of his family and prophecies his exile.



VI—In the heaven of Jupiter the spirits are grouped so as to form the eagle of Rome. Here Dante beholds just monarchs and princes such as Constantine and Trajan, and listens to an exposition of divine justice.

VII—In the heavens of the last planet, Saturn, which belongs to the contemplative spirits, St. Benedict appears; and then, climbing a mystic ladder thronged with spiritual lights, they enter

VIII—The heaven of the fixed stars or of the zodiac. In the sign of Gemini, under which he was born, Dante has a complete realization of the power of his mind, and looks down upon our little earth. He sees the triumph of Christ and of Mary in a procession of lights. St. Peter, St. James and St. John examine him in the Christian virtues before he ascends to

IX—The Crystal sky, where he has a symbolic revelation of God and the angels. Thence he passes from the physical universe to

X—The Empyrean, the eternal unchanging realm of spirit, where the elect dwell with their maker. Beatrice, who has become more and more radiant in nearing God, now resumes her place in the Celestial Rose, and Dante remains with St. Bernard, the symbol of Contemplation. He looks up and sees his beloved among the blessed. The lower part of the rose is occupied by innocent children: in the upper part, the fol-



lowers of the Old Law, who believed in the coming of Christ, sit on the left, while on the right are the members of the Christian Church. Mary, Mother of God, and St. John the Baptist, precursor of Christ, hold the commanding places.

Dante awaits in prayer, and St. Bernard beseeches the Blessed Virgin so to intercede that the vision of God may be granted to the pilgrim. The prayer is granted: the comprehension of the Eternal flashes upon Dante's soul—the mystery of the Three Persons in One Godhead, the mystery of the union of Man and God in Christ.

Both the allegory and the text of the *Divine Comedy* end in the revelation of the "Love which moves the Sun and the other stars."

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